



Reimagining the “New Normal”: Equity, Policy, COVID, and Rural Public Schools

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We can all agree that before COVID-19, not all school districts and not all communities had the same educational opportunities and resources. And we can all agree COVID-19 has exposed in a dramatic fashion the inequities and gaps that were often ignored and neglected for many years, for many children and for many school districts. Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English Learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups such as students experiencing homelessness and students in foster care, were less likely to have rigorous, engaging, and positive educational experiences before the pandemic. Now there is a real risk that school closures, distance learning, hybrid models, and schools opening and closing will fall heavily on these populations and on another: those in rural school districts (Economic Research Service, 2020).

Much has been written about the challenges of larger, urban school districts. Indeed, in the past, my own organization has concentrated our policy and legislative focus on mostly urban and large county school systems. Rob Mahaffy, my colleague and the executive director of the [Rural School and Community Trust](#), and longtime friends at [Organizations Concerned About Rural Education \(OCRE\)](#), were instrumental in assuring that rural, tribal, Alaskan Natives, and territories voices and needs be a seamless part of our organization’s agenda as well. The goal is the same: to assure that all children have access to and receive a high-quality public education no matter where they reside. And at the core of that mission is **equity**.

So here we are in the midst of a global pandemic. All school districts should be planning now for [how to make up this lost learning time](#), which particularly affects our most vulnerable students (King & Weingarten, 2020). Ideas include implementing summer programs, and extending or restructuring school days for the 2020-21 school year, summer of 2021, and school year 2022. During this period, federal, state, and local policymakers will be making difficult decisions and deciding how to make those choices



fair and equitable. Rural school districts have often been on the short end of these tradeoffs.

Many of the challenges that rural districts face are similar to mid-size and urban school districts. But there are also dynamics that work differently: size, scope, resources, community, political environment, staffing, geography, distance, isolation, workforce development, economics, and constrained tax base, to name a few. The point is not to undervalue the seriousness of the problems that urban education leaders face, but to recognize that rural districts face distinctive problems that have not received enough attention in terms of research, safety, resources, teacher and educator preparation, and certainly equitable policies and adequacy of funding.

Rural looks different across the country, from remote Native American lands in the West, to small towns in the Great Plains and Midwest, to the Mississippi Delta and Southern “Black Belt,” to Appalachia and New England. Rural looks different even within each state: it might be a town of a few thousand people, or tiny communities several hours or even days from the nearest city, as in parts of Alaska. These differences require policies that recognize that one size does not fit all. In far too many cases, rural districts still do not have the resources and opportunities they deserve compared to urban school districts, although there remain differences within rural areas and they are also hard to define as a unified idea.

In total, 46 million Americans live in rural areas. About 53% of our nation’s school districts and one-third of U.S. schools are in rural areas. Nearly 7.5 million public school students were enrolled in rural school districts during the 2016-17 school year—that’s nearly one of every seven students across the country. The number is even larger when counting students who attend rural schools within districts classified as “non-rural.” By this measure, more than 9.3 million students attend a rural school (Ratcliffe et. al, 2016). This means that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation’s 85 largest school districts combined. Nearly one in six rural students lives below the poverty line, one in seven qualifies for special education, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months (Showalter et. al, 2019).

To be clear, rural America offers assets often not available in urban settings. Rural residents feel that their community has a sense of shared values that are different from people in big cities: three quarters (74%) say other people in rural communities have similar values to their own, while two-thirds (65%) say people who live in big cities hold different values (Palosky & Singh, 2017). They also believe that their communities look out for one another and are good places to raise their children, and 76% of rural participants reported that their children’s schools are high quality. America’s rural communities and educators are a treasure and add to the rich diversity of this country.

For people living in rural America, schools are more than places of academic instruction. They provide food and health care for students, foster the sense of real community education, provide much-needed support for families, and act as central players in community life, with schools sometimes providing the only place for community

gatherings. However, even though many rural superintendents have found success in working collaboratively and with cooperatives, they face many obstacles, such as internet connectivity, post-secondary outcomes, and transportation funding. They struggle to recruit and retain teachers with specialized skills such as special education and TESOL. They need funding for support services such as child care, nurses, counselors, librarians and mental health workers. And finally, they need to figure out how to pay for rebuilding and renovating schools (Nicola et. al, 2020). And to make matters worse, the National Council of State Legislators predicts that because of COVID-19, states may face greater revenue shortfalls than during the Great Recession (National Conference of State Legislators, 2020). As rural districts spend time and resources on costly short-term strategies, either in person or virtually, they also worry about sustainability; as they fight for greater equity, the resources may not be there to support them in the future. Such lack of resources means rural students are more likely to have lower educational attainment, restricted student opportunity, and fewer support services (National Conference of State Legislators, 2020).

On the other hand, this is a moment in time—a short moment of time before the comforting chorus of “getting back to the old normal” gets too loud and powerful. If we can set clear expectations for our students, we can do the same for policy makers and our politicians at the state and federal levels. They need to spend time in rural school districts to better understand the issues before they make policies or pass laws. The current state and federal policies, laws, funding formulas and regulations that created the baked-in inequities need to be rooted out and replaced with policies that maintain the fundamental rights to a public education guaranteed to all children. It is possible to do this work while recognizing the distinct differences and characteristics between and among rural school districts.

The pandemic not only presents additional challenges for our rural schools, but also opportunities, very few of which are new, but most have historically resisted implementation. One thing is for certain: the world as we have known it will be vastly different by the end of this pandemic. As we endure the uncertainty of quarantine, we must ask ourselves what kind of world we want to return to for ourselves and our students.

For those aware of the inequities and unfairness that characterized schools in America prior to the crisis, this is also a time to ask: Could the pandemic be an opportunity through which we can bring about educational justice? While rural schools are highly local, they are also a matter of national interest and leadership—as much as highways and interstate commerce—and rural schools are graduating students whose lives will be connected to the rest of the world just as much as those in the big cities.

In that vein, there are lingering equity and policy challenges that will face all of us during and at the end of the pandemic, but especially rural schools and communities, including these:

1. Does the country have the political will to resolve internet inequality?

Nationwide, across all racial and ethnic groups, 16.9 million children remain logged out from instruction because their families lack the home internet access necessary to support online learning (Future Ready Schools et. al, 2020). Those households with children under the age of 18 years lack two essential elements for online learning: high-speed home internet service and a computer. One in three Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native households are not connected.

Rural Americans are also less likely to have a tablet, laptop, or desktop than urban and suburban residents (Khazan, 2020). They trail urban residents by 12 points and suburban residents by 16 points. In Mississippi, which serves 235,000 rural students, the Census Bureau reports that one-fifth of Mississippi households do not have a computer and nearly one-third lack high-speed Internet access (United States Census Bureau). According to the FCC, half of the residents of the Mississippi Delta have no access to the Internet. In addition, nearly all teachers nationally (96%) pay for their home-based high-speed internet themselves (Will, 2020b). And 10% of teachers, mostly in rural areas, [don't have high-speed, wireless internet at home](#) (Will, 2020a). They make do during the current school shutdowns with mobile hotspots or even working in parking lots or empty school buildings. Currently, there is a bill in Congress to increase the E-Rate by \$4 billion, which would go a long way in providing homes with broadband and connectivity (Will, 2020b).

2. What organizational changes are necessary to move from a factory school to a whole child school model, and what capacity is necessary for schools to serve both as educational institutions and safety net?

The path to educational success is different for each student, and availability to support services also varies. Data tell us that the road to success is tougher for young people who are engaged with the foster care system, are hungry, are parents, face school suspensions, lack secure housing and internet access, have special education needs and language barriers, may be from low-income households or have family members who are victims of the opioid epidemic. These young people need expanded supports to succeed, supports that are often not thought of when planning college access and success programs. If they are not addressed, we allow students to fall through the education, social, and emotional cracks. But the current model and school architecture is not designed to tackle many issues outside of their control. In South Dakota, which is one of the most rural of states, "rural educators often tout the generally lower student-teacher ratio and scores on standardized tests show that students in some rural South Dakota districts match or occasionally out perform their urban peers" (Pfankuch, 2019). Clearly, the school plays the role of community anchor, but a 19th century model is crashing into 21st century needs, the system is overwhelmed, and by its nature produces inequitable results. This is a time



to plan with the community the systemic changes required to respond to the demographic changes hitting urban and rural public schools (Rodriguez, 2020). To integrate via technology, face-to-face and through community organizations, a true community education model enables schools to respond to the needs of the “whole child” (Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child).

3. What are effective strategies and means to address teacher and principal shortages, retention, competition with other school districts, compensation, and professional development?

No small district has the capacity or the market to solve workforce issues on its own. This question requires a state and federally coordinated response, along with input from higher education leaders (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Solutions for urban settings generally do not successfully transfer to rural settings. In addition to dealing with the pandemic, distance learning issues, social-emotional learning, and accountability pressures that all districts face, rural districts also face challenges such as lower salaries, fears of isolation in an unfamiliar area, limited housing and recreational options, lack of human capital and resources, and little opportunity for professional development and professional growth (Schwartz, 2020). These same issues make it harder to recruit school administrators, which further compounds the teacher recruitment problem since teachers want to be supported by a strong administrative staff. As a result, many districts have had to hire teachers and principals without the proper licensure, especially in specialized areas such as working with students with special education needs and English Learners. It also challenges administrators to recruit a diverse teaching force that possesses the cultural competencies needed to work with an increasingly diverse student body and parents.

4. Can rural districts continue to maintain a presence and strong voice at the federal level that sustains and increases funding?

Let’s say it up front. Just like healthcare, public education has been underfunded, especially in rural communities. Rural education requires a continued strong federal funding presence. As problematic and bureaucratic as federal funding might be for rural districts—and many do not have the capacity to compete for grants or provide matches—most rural districts and communities rely on federal resources to supplement state and local tax bases. To support schools to meet ESSA requirements, the Rural Education Achievement Program authorizes two rural programs: The Small Rural School Achievement Program and The Rural and Low-Income Schools Program, which increase the focus on rural schools. Other programs that have rural priorities include the Full Service Community Schools, 21st Century Community Schools, Impact Aid, IDEA, Head Start and Early Head Start, in addition to other social and health services such as Medicaid, the Supplemental



Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), CHIP, Summer Feeding, Migrant Education, the Child Care Development Block Grant, and Women with Infants and Children (WIC). The big takeaway is that federal spending on all children's programs dropped from 7.98% in FY 2015 to 7.21% in 2019—confirming a downward trend in federal spending for children (First Focus on Children, 2019).

5. Will states and local communities provide the resources needed to achieve equity and opportunity for rural children and families?

Rural school finance is extremely complex, but at the heart of both state and local finance structure lie issues of economies of scale, local tax assessments, levy rates, local control, and local willingness to support increases in school revenues. Challenges include deferred maintenance to buildings and infrastructure, struggles to provide the same access to high-level courses for rural students, difficulty in retaining teachers, and to add a final nail in the proverbial coffin, the cost of opening school buildings safely during the pandemic, all of which add to the pressures rural schools face.

To date, state school funding systems have been challenged in 45 states, from New York to, most recently, Kansas. Yet because rural schools are not on a level playing field with urban and suburban schools, lack of adequate resources threatens their very existence. Rural school districts thus continue to lag behind urban areas with respect to federal funds. When access to federal programs depends on the absolute number of disadvantaged students rather than proportions, small rural schools typically lose out to affluent metropolitan ones. Federal policies are often based on preparing students for an urban life rather than answering the needs of a rural setting. Rural communities are in great need of institutions that will strengthen rural life, serve all members of all ages in the community, and link education to other social services and economic enterprises within the area. Education must be linked with other rural development activities, and rural development itself should be based on comprehensive rural studies rather than on applications of urban models as determinants of rural life (Parks & Hoke, 1979).

Conclusion

Creating equity and reimagining schooling after the pandemic requires listening to everyone within the community--and building on the assets that rural schools offer. Reimagining requires engaging parents, teachers, principals, support services, health care, business, the Farm Bureau, social services, juvenile justice, and students. While they may not be an economy of scale, rural schools' smaller class sizes support individualized instruction and more teacher attention, conditions that also provide an opportunity to assure that our marginalized communities are part of the conversation.



Not only have tens of millions of families across the country had to play an active role in the “schooling” of their children during the pandemic, but the void left by schools is being felt across multiple dimensions of social, economic, political and community life. Schools are not just places where young people learn; they are also places of community and connection, physical and emotional safety, shelter and food, democracy and deliberation. In addition, the economy cannot function without schools, unless we devise another way to ensure that children are supervised while their parents are at work.

Building on rural assets, beginning to plan, holding our state and federal policymakers accountable--this is what our rural schools and communities are good at. Let’s make the mantra “we are all in this together” work for equitable educational opportunities and upward mobility for all of our children. We can do this.

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